

# Online Distance Learning Experience in the Light of COVID-19 Pandemic in Higher Education in Palestine: EFL Instructors' and Learners' Perspectives

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## Abstract

This study explored the experience of Online Distance Learning (ODL) implementation in higher education (HE) in Palestine during the COVID- 19 pandemic from the perspectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors and learners. The study aimed to provide a holistic description of the current situation of ODL in HE in Palestine in terms of perceived usefulness of technology use, activities implemented via ODL, university support for ODL implementation, effectiveness and quality of ODL, assessment practices, and academic fraud in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also aimed to provide participants' evaluation of the ODL experience to benefit from for future action. For these purposes, mixed methods approach was employed. 17 instructors from five different universities participated in filling in the survey, five of them took part in semi- structured in- depth interviews, and 74 learners responded to the learners' questionnaire. The results showed that instructors viewed ODL experience positively and recommended its accreditation in the future. The results also showed that learners' perspectives regarding ODL usefulness, effectiveness and easiness of use of ODL ranged from moderate to high, however, they were in favor of face- to- face instruction as the qualitative section revealed. Both instructors and learners encountered different types of problems which were classified into technical, instructional, personal and ethical problems. Assessment and academic dishonesty were among the critical issues resulting from ODL implementation in Palestinian universities that required intervention.

**Keywords:** academic fraud, assessment factors, ODL challenges, ODL quality, perceived usefulness

## 1. Introduction and background

COVID- 19 pandemic has already affected all sectors of life all over the world resulting in almost complete paralysis due to the imposition of the precautionary shutdowns. According to UNESCO estimates as reported by Giannini (2020), over 89% out of the total population of the world have been out of schools and universities because of COVID-19 closures. Shraim (2018) reports that there are “52 accredited HE institutions in Palestine for the academic year 2015–2016” (p. 17). These institutions provide education and training to more than 216,028 learners who have been affected by this shutdown (Jawabreh, 2020). Consequently, and upon the declaration of the state of emergency by the Palestinian government in March 2020, all universities in Palestine were obliged to pursue ODL to ensure continuity of the educational process as part of the solution to the COVID-19 pandemic spread. Although this obligation was imposed as a must for the sake of safety, it has not been planned which necessitates careful investigation of the experience of ODL to provide insights for educationalists and decisions makers to plan the stage after COVID- 19. Research envisions ODL as an innovative trendy learning approach (Jaschick & Lederman, 2019; Singh & Thurman, 2019) whose cost effectiveness is highly appreciated by HE institutions (Kara, Erdoğan, Kokoç, & Cagiltay, 2019; Vymetalkova & Milkova, 2019). This is because of its flexibility (Daneji, Ayub, & Khambari, 2019; Kara *et al.*, 2019) and the role it plays in changing learning from ‘know-how’ and ‘know-what’ to ‘know-where’ (Dai, Teo, Rappa, and Huang, 2020, p.1). Singh and Thurman (2019) consider ODL in HE as referencing courses which are offered completely online resorting to physical separation as a means to bridge instructional gap assuming that distance learning is synonymous to online distance learning. In line with this assumption, Kintu and Wanami (2019) claim that the terms distance education, e-learning, web-based training, and ODL are often used interchangeably. This claim draws on the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) definition of ODL as the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at distance.

Universities in Palestine have many experiences in ODL learning since 2005 (Shraim, 2018). However, this has been the first practice in which all educational activities were delivered entirely online, synchronously and asynchronously in all HE institutions in Palestine. Such unprecedented emergent situation has provoked a lot of arguments by Palestinian intellectuals who consider e- learning a kind of revolution that will transform education in the future based on its various features (Jarbawi, 2020). This has caused universities to scramble to ODL (Jawabreh, 2020) without prior planning or examination of the readiness of institutions for such a step. Crucially, planning has been emphasized in Dede (2002) vision for the future success of technologies in 2020 in order not to be “drained by its demands” (p.72). Planning could be an indicator for the success of ODL programs through the inclusion of pre-determined course content; the use of questionnaires and follow-up interviews with course designers, teachers and support staff; observation of course interactions and assessment (White, 2014). Since ODL has proved to be the only worldwide adopted solution to COVID- 19 closure, pursuing this experience in a developing occupied country like Palestine with very limited resources accompanied by lack of prior planning raises the question of readiness of educational institutions for ODL implementation effectively. This, in turn, necessitates careful investigation of the ODL experience to shed light on these experiences from the perspectives of two main stakeholders in the process, instructors and learners. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perspectives of EFL instructors and learners of ODL implementation in HE in Palestine. It also aims to find out the participants’ evaluation of the ODL experience. This, in turn, will provide

educationalists in HE and other stakeholders in Palestine with insights and implications to plan the stage after COVID- 19, and the possibility of ODL accreditation in the future. Accordingly, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of EFL instructors toward ODL experience in terms of perceived usefulness of technology use, activities implemented via ODL, university support for ODL implementation, assessment practices, quality of ODL, and academic fraud in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of EFL learners of ODL experience in terms of perceived usefulness, effectiveness, easiness in using ODL, and academic fraud in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: How do EFL instructors and learners evaluate their ODL experience in the light of COVID-19 pandemic?

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 ODL in foreign language education**

Distance learning or online courses for teaching foreign languages is a relatively recent field. It has provoked the complaint of the sufficiency of oral practice when learning languages through ODL in comparison with face-to- face setting (Zhihai, 2010). Still, ODL as an educational medium, has a notable contribution to the L2 curriculum with emphasis on collaborative exchange and co-construction of learning languages by being a significant avenue of enquiry in language teaching (White, 2014). Agustina and Cahyono (2017) asserted this significance by showing the positive effects of EFL teachers' utilization of technologies for English learning such as Power Point, Videos, Electronic dictionaries, Blogs, Edmodo and Facebook. These effects included remarkable improvements on speaking skills and the other language skills and language components, especially pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Kamnoetsin (2014) found how Facebook helped to improve learners' English writing skills, grammar and vocabulary while breaking space-time constraints. Such learning experiences helped in reflecting positive attitudes and perceptions toward the effectiveness of online learning (Daneji et al., 2019). Agustina and Cahyono (2017) explored EFL teachers' and learners' perspectives on the teaching of EFL via Quipper School. EFL teachers perceived its use positively in coping with the limited time available for language teaching while supporting the learners' EFL learning. Contrary to these views, Zheng, Lin, and Kwon (2020) stated that, among all subject areas, languages presented the largest challenge in online education, reporting negative effects and negative feelings of learners in comparison with similar face-to-face courses.

### **2.2 Perceived usefulness, easiness and effectiveness of ODL**

Daneji et al. (2019) defined perceived usefulness of ODL as the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system will increase his or her job performance. Its cost effectiveness is reflected in its power to address and reach a large number of independent learners unconstrained by time and place, deliver customized content according to learners' needs and possibilities. It also offers direct active work with study materials in which educators do not have to photocopy materials or spend time correcting assignments and giving feedback (Kara *et al.*, 2019; Vymetalkova & Milkova, 2019). Kara *et al.* (2019) highlighted the learner-centered nature of instructional design models in ODL programs while asserting the necessity of instructors'

possession of a sound understanding of the link between adult learners' characteristics and the appropriateness of the online environments for individualized instruction.

### **2.3 Challenges to ODL**

Research showed that instructors in HE had reservations about teaching at distance online. These included according to McGee, Windes and Torres (2017) lack of institutional support, increased workload, and demands of technical competency, lack of incentives, the threat to job security, questionable quality of online course design or teaching, missing or ill-defined standards of performance, requirement of rigid or advanced technological ability, excessive time requirements, as well as vague or inflexible training requirements. Erguvan (2014) revealed a variety of challenges based on his exploration of faculty members' perspectives of a specific web-based instruction tool. These were: grading, technical difficulties, plagiarism, openness to manipulation topics or types of articles used, teachers' role, and management of courses. For Gold (2001), factors that could result in the failure of ODL were extraordinary cost of implementation, lack of quality curriculum materials, and inadequate professional training.

### **2.4 Quality of ODL**

Drawing on constructivist viewpoint, Mumford and Dikilitas (2020) argued that although constructivist learning is not inherent in technology, online tools have the potential to provide constructivist learning environments since the instructor and the tasks provided play a key role in quality learning. This is because what works in the traditional classroom within a stable cohort of learners communicating synchronously, face-to-face is qualitatively different from an online asynchronous setting if educational transformation or reform to be guaranteed (Gold, 2001). They could be equally effective only if they are properly designed in which quality pedagogy is the determining factor that leads to better learning outcomes (Arrosagaray, González-Peiteado, Pino-Juste, and Rodríguez-López, 2019). Ward, Peters, and Shelley (2010) compared instructors' and learners' views regarding the quality of the learning experience via Synchronous Interactive Online Instruction (SIOI) with the quality of learning in face- to-face and asynchronous ODL. Their results showed that learners rated the dimensions of instructional quality the same for SIOI and face- to-face course formats except in the ease of access to the course dimension for the sake of SIOI and asynchronous online formats.

### **2.5 Assessment and plagiarism in ODL**

Assessment is one of the key elements of online course design and pedagogy. It is mainly about the process of producing specific outcomes whose products are assessed within the contexts they are produced (Reju & Jita, 2020). Doubtfully, Gold (2001) illustrated that the evaluation of learners' performance through traditional testing methods could be automated online. Therefore, Rovai (2003) emphasized that online instructors need to incorporate different authentic assessment measures to gauge deep understanding of concepts among learners in simulated non-threatening environments. This could be done through authentic knowledge application, portfolios, projects, performances to allow learners to transfer skills they learnt. Reju and Jita (2020) claimed that assessment of online courses still progresses at a slow pace and is subject to plagiarism or cheating

due to lack of ethical principles and legal implications (Lindahl & Grace, 2018). Plagiarism occurs because of learners' lack of awareness of plagiarism, low probability of being detected, pressure derived from the level of demand (Torres-Diaz, Duarte, & Hinojosa-Becerra, 2018).

### **3. Material and methods**

#### **3.1 Participants**

Participants in the present study consisted of 17 EFL professors and 74 learners from five universities in Palestine. Namely, Hebron University, Birzeit University, Al- Quds Open University, An- Najah National University, and Palestine Polytechnic University. The participants were purposefully chosen because they were reachable to one of the researchers and accepted voluntarily to take part in the study. 5 university instructors participated voluntarily in semi-structured interviews, 2 males and 3 females. Both written and oral informed consent were maintained for the quantitative and qualitative phases. Particularly, anonymity and confidentiality of the participants' responses and their right to withdraw were assured by making an explicit statement as such at the beginning of the questionnaires and interview.

#### **3.2 Data collection instruments**

Mixed methods approach was employed in this study “to better understand a research problem and question than either method by itself” (Creswell, 2012, p. 535). Quantitatively, the study applied two questionnaires: one for the instructors which was adopted from the eighth validated survey of the Inside Higher Ed's<sup>1</sup> in collaboration with Gallup<sup>2</sup> firm to understand professors' views of ODL and other aspects of online technology to reach an attempted census of digital learning leaders (Jaschick & Lederman, 2019); the adopted sections asked about instructors' general information and their perspectives in terms of: reasons for supporting and not supporting technology use, activities conducted online, institutional support for ODL implementation, assessment factors, academic fraud, and quality of ODL; the second was for learners' and was adapted from Ullah, Khan & Khan (2017). Minor modifications were made to the questionnaire and a section regarding academic fraud was adopted from the GALLUP survey (Jaschick & Lederman, 2019). For the sake of reliability, it was piloted to 20 learners outside the study sample. Cronbach alpha was calculated, and it was 0.735 which is “satisfactory” (Creswell, 2012, p. 606). Qualitatively, semi- structured interviews were conducted with instructors and three open- ended questions were added to the learners' survey. The semi- structured interviews consisted of 9 questions to in-depth investigate the EFL instructors' ODL experience in the light of COVID- 19 pandemic. Learners' qualitative questions asked them about the assessment tasks they performed during ODL experience, challenges encountered, their opinions regarding the experience and future accreditation. Both the instructors' and learners' qualitative questions were discussed and approved by three educational experts.

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<sup>1</sup> Inside Higher Ed is the online source for news, opinions and jobs for all of higher education

<sup>2</sup> Global analytics and advice firm that helps leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

The questionnaires were delivered to the participants online via google forms. Three of the instructors' interviews were conducted online via messenger, recorded following instructors' consent, whereas and the other preferred to answer by filling in google forms. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used for quantitative data analysis. Excel sheets of the responses on google forms were downloaded, coded, and imported to SPSS. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were calculated to answer the study questions. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Recorded qualitative data were transcribed word by word, and those on google forms were combined followed by thematic coding.

## 4. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings of the study questions and their discussion quantitatively and qualitatively.

4.1 Findings of RQ1: What are the perspectives of EFL instructors toward ODL experience in terms of the perceived usefulness of technology use, activities implemented via ODL, university support for ODL implementation, assessment practices, quality of ODL, and academic fraud in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic?

4.1.1 Instructors' perspectives of perceived usefulness of technology use was investigated by exploring their reasons for supporting and/ or not supporting ODL implementation as presented in tables 2.1 and 2.2

*Table 2.1: Instructors' perspectives of supporting reasons for the increased use of ODL technologies*

Items	N	%
Some learners simply cannot attend a face-to-face class due to work or family obligations.	11	64.7
I believe my learners learn better when I engage them with effective technology tools.	9	52.9
I like experimenting with new instructional methods and tools.	8	47.1
I have had success with education technology in the past.	5	29.4
I like the flexibility teaching online offers me as an instructor.	8	47.1
My institution provides adequate training on how to use new technologies.	6	35.3
My institution rewards people who adopt new technologies.	0	0

*Table 2.2: Instructors' reasons for not supporting the use of ODL technologies*

Items	N	%
I am confident that instruction delivered without using technology most effectively serves my learners.	4	23.5

There is too much corporate influence.	4	23.5
I don't believe the benefits to learners justify the costs associated with adoption.	1	5.90
Faculty lose too much control over the course when they use technology.	6	35.3
I don't know what technology would be most effective for my classes.	2	11.8
My institution does not provide adequate training on how to use the technology.	3	17.6
Available technologies at my institution are poor quality.	5	29.4
The materials are too expensive.	5	29.4

Tab. 2.1 shows that instructors supported the increased use of ODL because of its easiness, flexibility, and perceived usefulness. They perceived university reinforcement negatively with no rewards given to innovators (Vymetalkova & Milkova, 2019). Whereas, Tab. 2.2 shows that the most compelling reason for instructors not to support the increased use of ODL was loss of too much control over the course when using technology followed by poor quality of available technology and expensive materials. Only 23.5% of instructors were confident that instruction delivered without technology was the most effective contrary to Jaschik and Lederman (2019) in which 65% supported traditional teaching without technology.

#### 4.1.2 Activities implemented via ODL

*Table 3: Instructors' perspectives of online distance learning (ODL) practices*

Items	N	R	S	U	A
Share syllabus information with learners.	0.0%	0.0%	35.3%	29.4%	35.3%
Record grades.	0.0%	0.0%	23.5%	47.1%	29.4%
Communicate with learners.	0.0%	0.0%	11.8%	23.5%	64.7%
Provide e-textbooks and related material.	0.0%	5.9%	29.4%	35.3%	29.4%
Track learners' attendance.	5.9%	0.0%	35.3%	35.3%	23.5%
Identify learners who may need extra help.	0.0%	17.6%	23.5%	35.3%	23.5%
Integrate lecture capture.	0.0%	0.0%	35.3%	52.9%	11.8%

N: Never; R: Rarely; S: Sometimes; U: Usually; A: Always

Tab. 3 reflects positive ODL practices of instructors specifically as a tool for communication with learners. The least positively perceived ODL practice was the use of ODL as a diagnostic tool to identify learners who required additional help.

#### 4.1.3 University support for ODL implementation

*Table 4: Instructors' perspectives of university support for ODL*

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
Has a climate that encourages experimentation with new approaches to teaching, including with technology.	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	88.2%	11.8%
Has policies that protect faculty members' intellectual property rights for digital work.	5.9%	5.9%	29.4%	58.8%	0.0%
Compensates fairly for online instruction.	5.9%	17.6%	35.3%	29.4%	11.8%
Acknowledges time demands for online courses for workload.	0.0%	11.8%	29.4%	52.9%	5.9%
Appropriately rewards contributions made to digital pedagogy.	0.0%	23.5%	23.5%	47.1%	5.9%

SD: Strongly Disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree

Tab. 4 demonstrates that universities highly encouraged instructors to experiment with new approaches to teaching where all instructors either agreed or strongly agreed to this point. However, approximately half of the university instructors reported that they were not appropriately rewarded for being innovative (Jaschik & Lederman, 2019).

#### 4.1.4 Assessment practices

*Table 5: Instructors' perspectives of ODL assessment practices*

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
Faculty members at my institution play a central role in deciding how to measure student success	0.0%	5.9%	17.6%	58.8%	17.6%
My institution's use of assessment is more about keeping decision makers happy than it is about teaching and learning.	0.0%	29.4 %	23.5%	41.2%	5.9%
There is meaningful discussion at my college about how to use the assessment information	0.0%	5.9%	23.5%	58.8%	11.8%
These assessment efforts have improved the quality of teaching and learning at my institution	0.0%	0.0%	17.6%	70.6%	11.8%
My institution regularly makes changes in the curriculum, teaching practices or student services based on what it finds through assessment	0.0%	0.0%	35.3%	52.9%	11.8%

SD: Strongly Disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree

Tab. 5 illustrates the decisive role assessment plays in online learning. The majority of the responses revealed positive perceptions of the instructors concerning the efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning, program effectiveness, types of assessments, and decision making. (Amin and Mohammadkarimi, 2019; Reju and Jita, 2020).

#### 4.1.5 Quality of ODL



*Table 6: Instructors’ perspectives of ODL quality compared to in- person (traditional) courses*

Items	Lower quality	Same quality	Better quality
Interaction with learners outside of class	41.2%	23.5%	35.3%
Interaction with learners during class	35.3%	47.1%	17.6%
Communication with the college about logistical and other issues	35.3%	41.2%	23.5%
Grading and communicating about grading	35.3%	41.2%	23.5%
Ability to deliver the necessary content to meet learning objectives	29.4%	52.9%	17.6%
Ability to answer student questions	17.6%	52.9%	29.4%
Ability to reach “at risk” learners	23.5%	35.3%	41.2%

Tab. 6 shows that instructors perceived ODL courses of similar quality to in- person courses expect in interaction outside class with 41.2% of them considered ODL of lower quality. Whereas 41.2% of them perceived ODL of better quality in its ability to teach at risk (Ward et al., 2010).

#### 4.1.6 Academic fraud

*Table 7.1: Instructors’ and learners’ perspectives of identity verification method*

Items	Instructors		Learners	
	N (17)	%	N (74)	%
Login with username and password	16	94.1	51	68.9
Live proctoring <sup>3</sup>	3	17.6	17	23
Remote proctoring via webcam	1	5.9	11	14.9
Photo identification	3	17.6	9	12.2
Keystroke analysis <sup>4</sup>	2	11.8	7	9.5
Fingerprint identification	0	0	5	6.8
Voice recognition	5	29.4	18	24.3
None of these	2	11.8	7	9.5

*Table 7.2: Instructors' and learners' perspectives of the plagiarism issue*

Items	Indicators	Instructors		Learners	
		N (17)	%	N (74)	%
Confidence in the effectiveness of methods the university uses for online identity verification	Not confident at all	0	0	8	10.8
	Not too confident	5	29.4	18	24.3
	Somewhat confident	8	47.1	35	47.3
	Very confident	4	23.5	13	17.6
Learners' having sufficient understanding of plagiarism	Yes	4	23.5	55	74.3
	No	5	29.4	19	25.7
	Maybe	8	47.1	0	0
Submission of papers through plagiarism-detection software	Yes	11	64.7	42	56.8
	No	6	35.3	32	43.2

Tab. 7.1 provides information about the most commonly way for identity identification; whereas, Tab.7.2 provides indicators regarding participants' confidence in the identity verification methods, plagiarism knowledge and methods used to avoid or detect plagiarism.

**4.2 Findings of RQ2:** What are the perspectives of EFL learners of ODL experience in terms of perceived usefulness, effectiveness, easiness in using ODL, and academic fraud in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic?

#### 4.2.1 Learners' perspectives of ODL usefulness

<sup>3</sup> Students can be viewed or monitored in the real time while taking exams

<sup>4</sup> Detailed timing information which describes exactly when each key was pressed and when it was released as a person is typing at a computer keyboard

*Table 8: Descriptive statistics of learners' perspectives for supporting and/ or not support ODL adoption*

Items	Means	SD
It is difficult to understand ODL without getting acquainted with appropriate guidance.	3.82	.85
It is difficult to favor ODL on regular basis due to least face to face interaction among learners and teachers.	3.77	.84
Learners' and teachers' interaction is weak through ODL.	3.78	.95
Slow computer and poor internet connections discourage me to use ODL.	4.20	.88
ODL promotes social isolation.	3.65	.96
ODL can be suggested as a useful program for peers to utilize for ODL materials.	3.51	1.01
ODL highly motivates me for taking advanced courses.	2.92	1.20
Using ODL makes learning interesting.	2.72	1.19

Table 8 shows that learners perceived technical problems represented in poor and slow internet connection highly with a mean score equals 3.82. However, they viewed the use of ODL to make learning motivating or interesting moderate to negative.

#### 4.2.2 Learners' perspectives of ODL effectiveness

*Table 9: Descriptive statistics of learners' perspectives of ODL effectiveness*

Items	Means	SD
The usability and expertise in computers ensure the effectiveness in computer mediated learning.	3.65	.99
ODL ensures the effectiveness in terms of coping up with missed lectures	3.66	.95
Our productivity as learners can be enhanced through ODL to strengthen educational concepts	3.19	1.06
ODL is economic for learners or teachers	3.58	.98
ODL ensures the effectiveness for presenting my work in class or online	3.19	1.00
Quality of teaching and learning can be increased through ODL because it integrates various types of media	3.12	1.07
ODL offers maximum engagement for us as learners	3.05	1.06
A number of problems are created by ODL rather than solution	3.55	1.12
Access to education increases through ODL	3.00	1.09
Maximum amount of time is consumed while learning through ODL	3.29	1.02

Table 9 shows that learners perceived the effectiveness of ODL highly in the usability and expertise in computers, coping with missed lectures, and its being economic. However, all the items related to ODL quality, student engagement, access to education, and time were perceived of moderate effectiveness by learners with overall mean equals 3.33.

### 4.2.3 Learners' perspectives of ODL easiness of use

*Table 10: Learners' perspectives of the easiness in using ODL*

Items	Means	SD
The web is often student friendly for searching online educational resources (Books, articles, etc.)	3.57	0.98
Doing assignments or reading lecture's web notes are easy for me to manage and/or learn.	3.14	1.04
Expression of thoughts or notions is a hectic job in terms of writing via ODL	3.51	0.85
It is easy to read learning materials from print instead of electronic medium or internet	3.42	1.22
Use of ODL resources is easier and better than using books/journals in the library.	3.20	1.05
It is easy to become skillful at using ODL systems.	3.59	1.07
Learning of courses through online portal is difficult.	3.32	1.10
ODL provides better platform for learning via direct interaction among learners and teachers	2.96	1.00
Acquisition and/ or learning of significant information is difficult through using internet.	3.18	1.10
ODL makes the learners slaves to technology	3.45	1.10
Total	3.33	.42

Tab. 10 reveals that learners have moderate to high perspectives regarding the easiness of using ODL with overall mean equals 3.33. Contradictorily, despite the easiness conveyed by learners of being skillful at using ODL systems which has the highest mean score of 3.59, they perceived using these systems or platforms for interaction between learners and teachers not easy with the lowest mean score conveyed to this item which equals 2.92.

**4.3 Findings of RQ3:** How do EFL instructors and learners describe their ODL experience in the light of COVID-19 pandemic? To get in depth understanding of the ODL experience in terms of the pedagogical practices, assessment practices, challenges encountered, evaluation of the experiences, and implications for future use, qualitative data were used to answer this question.

*Table 11: Summary of qualitative findings*

Themes	Subthemes
Pedagogical practices	-Use of variety of platforms -Instruction mediums -Approaches to teaching and learning -Use of authentic materials or online sources in EFL teaching.
Assessment practices	-Types of assessment -Validity and reliability of online assessment -Skills developed
Challenges to ODL	-Varied problems encountered: -Technical/ Poor internet connectivity and infrastructure -Instructional/ exaggeration in the amount of assignments -Personal/ health and family issues

- Ethical/ plagiarism
  - Evaluation of the experience - Varied views of instructors and learners
  - Conditioned future implementation
- 

#### **4.3.1 Pedagogical practices**

ODL has been implemented in Palestinian universities using a variety of platforms such as ZOOM, MOODLE, MOOC, google classroom, google meet, online discussion forums, and social media. Instructors revealed that they used different pedagogical practices such as lecturing, group work, presentations, peer tutoring, closed Facebook groups, ZOOM meetings, drama, independent learning learner-centered approach. EFL instructors considered online leaning suitable for different courses particularly languages because in the view of this instructor, “We use educational video activities to develop learners’ listening, comprehension, and critical thinking skills”. Similarly, a student elaborated, “Instructors ask for many activities like story analysis, summarizing a book and making video presentation or audio recording presented via zoom”.

#### **4.3.2 Assessment practices**

Both EFL instructors and learners mentioned various types of assessment used to evaluate learners’ performance. Some assignments were authentic such as online presentations, book summary, writing 1000 sentences for grammar, reflective papers, role play, pantomiming, evaluation of a story presented through You Tube, writing essays, critical analysis of different articles, translation of literary works, online exams via google form, take home exams, reports, research, exams, making project. Instructors expressed no doubt in the validity and reliability of these ways of assessment assuming that “...learners' answers reflect their perspectives and their ways of thinking and thus, they are valid and reliable”.

#### **4.3.3 Challenges to ODL**

Unexpectedly enforcing ODL temporarily in response to COVID-19 pandemic have created many problems. Both instructors and learners revealed four major types of challenges or problems which were divided into technical, instructional, ethical, and personal problems. Technical problems included: poor infrastructure; poor internet connection; instructional problems such as the number of assignments given compared to time allowed; and clash with assignments of other courses in terms of deadlines; lack of communication between learners and instructors; poor understanding of the material delivered online; ethical problems such as cheating, plagiarism, lack of commitment by learners and some instructors ‘or in instructors’ follow up for learners’ work; personal problems such as stress, health problems, and family issues.

#### **4.3.4 EFL Instructors’ and learners’ evaluation of ODL experience in light of COVID-19**

EFL instructors’ views of their ODL experience were varied. Some were very positive to ODL due to its flexibility, the role it plays in enhancing learners critical thinking, autonomy and holding responsibility of their learning as one instructor expressed, “successful experience which has created an atmosphere of competition among learners and even instructors. It provided room for research, experimentation, and repost writing, ODL reduced time, effort and cost”. Some were moderate as this instructor clarified, “It is fairly good because even if I have experience in ODL which was blended, it is very difficult to move completely online which I do not recommend it”. Others were negative view as this instructor illustrated, “It was a tiring, time-consuming, and exhausting physically and psychologically” ... learners are not used to this system and committed bad behaviors e.g. bullying... teachers’ exaggeration of assignments.

The majority of the learners except for eight out of the 74 participants reflected negative views of the experience and expressed disfavor of repeating the ODL experience either because it is harder, or because they are better at studying paper works, more commitment in face- to- face instruction, etc. In both cases, learners put conditions for the implementation of ODL. For example, one of the senior learners complained, “The failures of the E-learning were much more than its successes... I am strongly against e-learning, unless our teachers are trained on how to deal with ODL in terms of quantity, quality and methods of assessment”. Positive views were mainly based on economic issues as a student justified, “because I don't need to use two vehicles to reach the university so I save money”. A conditioned favor of ODL was reflected in this learners’ words, “I am with ODL if each teacher provides me with a clear outline from the beginning of the course along with assessment criteria and deadlines for each project...”.

## 5. Conclusions, limitations and implications

ODL has been a considered a unique solution for the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting closures of educational institutions. Both EFL instructors and learners perceived ODL cost effective because of its flexibility and easiness of use quantitatively and qualitatively (Kara *et al.*, 2019; Vymetalkova & Milkova, 2019). Furthermore, instructors and learners considered ODL as an opportunity (Daneji et al., 2019) that developed their virtual and technological skills (Dai et al., 2020). It also provided room for engagement in individualized instruction (Zhihai, 2010). EFL participants in this study considered ODL a shift toward authentic assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this shift has reflected the major problem of academic dishonesty which encountered instructors and was very high (Reju & Jita, 2020). The inconsistent quantitative results between instructors’ and learners’ responses to learners’ understanding of plagiarism raises a serious ethical problem. 76.5% of instructors were either confident that their learners did not understand what plagiarism is or were reluctant about their knowledge. Whereas, 74.3% of learners reported that they had sufficient understanding of plagiarism. This indicates that universities should provide more awareness to instructors and learners to avoid plagiarism specifically intentional plagiarism (Lindahl & Grace, 2018). Further research should explore the reasons why learners resorted to plagiarism despite their understanding of it meant and how it can be reduced. Although both the EFL instructors and learners reflected intermediate to high perspectives towards online learning as a partial solution to the COVID- 19 pandemic closures, they were more in favor of face- to- face or blended learning. Still, they did not favor shifting to ODL completely mainly because of its lack of interaction and communication between learners and teachers contrary to what Kara *et al.* (2019) claimed. Therefore, further research that explores learners’ engagement in ODL from the perspectives of both instructors and learners should be conducted. The results showed that both instructors and learners agreed that if ODL to be accredited in the future in HE in Palestine, more efforts should be placed on the planning process of ODL specifically because of the limited infrastructure and nature of the educational system in Palestine. Accordingly, coordination among HE stakeholders and telecommunication companies, sufficient training, and improvement of infrastructure facilities should be worked on as prerequisites for the success of ODL implementation (Arrosagaray, et al., 2019; Dede, 2000; Erguvan, 2014; Gold, 2001). Moreover, different initiatives for the implementation of e-learning in its different forms were conducted individually in some Palestinian universities (Shraim, 2018) which limits the benefits

of those initiatives to the targeted institution only. This requires HE institutions to collaborate to plan and design a more holistic approach that aspires to quality revolutionary education (Dai et al., 2020; Jarbawi, 2020) with the goal of spreading knowledge while keeping the specificity of each university. Future research on ODL may require systemic needs analysis research of HE institutions in Palestine. One limitation of this study lies in its purposeful sample which targeted only EFL instructors or students who study in some universities that are located in the West Bank only. Consequently, similar future research at a wider level which targets HE institutions in Gaza Strip and addresses leaders and other stakeholders in HE institutions is suggested to find out how they can support the accreditation of ODL based on the results of the current study.

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